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## **Document 9**

### **Background on CATS Online Assessment**

The CATS Online Assessment is in response to the need to provide a way for students with disabilities to take the KCCT in a manner that is consistent with how they primarily access curriculum content in the classroom setting. The development of this accessible format of the KCCT was preceded by two pilot test sessions, one in May 2002 and another in fall of 2002. The fall pilot included 46 schools and almost 400 students with disabilities.

The following is an article that was published in the February *Kentucky Teacher* newsletter that summarizes the development of the CATS Online Assessment, and provides some of the evaluation data collected from the CATS Online Fall Pilot.

### **New Era of Accessibility**

## **Eligible students can take state tests online this spring**

**By Fran Salyers**

**Kentucky Department of Education**

This spring, for the first time in Kentucky's 13-year history of statewide testing under the governance of the Kentucky Education Reform Act to measure student achievement and school accountability, students with disabilities will be able to take the state's tests online. This is available only to those students with disabilities who:

- have an individual educational plan (IEP) or 504 Plan that includes the need for a "reader" as an instructional and assessment accommodation,
- routinely use textreader or screenreader technology to access printed materials in classroom instruction and assessment, and
- have experience in using the Kentucky Core Content Tests Online Practice Area

{Accommodations for these students must be related to the students' disabilities, and be consistent with sound instructional practice for a student for whom accommodations are provided.}

"The innovation marks a new era of equity and accessibility for students", says Education Commissioner Gene Wilhoit. "This is one more step in our commitment for equal educational opportunities for all students," Wilhoit said. "Students with disabilities will now be able to take the Kentucky Core Content Tests independently, using the same technologies they use throughout the year to learn."

The Department of Education will post the tests on a password-protected website. Students whose disabilities make them eligible to take the tests online can have test questions read aloud by software known as textreaders or screenreaders, and choose other accommodations such as font size and color schemes, based on their IEP. The site will feature a link to online help with problems related to the online testing process, plus a prompt to ask a teacher for help when necessary.

Already available online are practice areas that let students and their teachers get familiar and comfortable with this new tool's design and operation. The online test and practice areas are available for all Kentucky Core Content Tests administered in grades 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11 and 12. The online option is not available for the nationally normed CTBS tests taken by students in grades 3, 6 and 9.

The launch of online testing follows more than two years of planning and technical design work plus two "trial runs," one in May 2002 involving 61 students in 21 schools and one last fall involving almost 400 students in 46 schools. Overall, the feedback from those trials was positive.

- Most participating teachers (67 percent) reported that students seemed to like taking the tests online. It carried "less stigma" than having test questions read aloud by a human reader. Most of the teachers themselves found the computerized accommodation preferable to the use of human readers.
- More than half of the participating teachers said online testing increased student understanding of test questions; only 10 percent said it made testing harder for students.
- Ninety-two percent of the teachers said that monitoring the students during testing was "easy," with little to no concern about students seeking undue assistance (for example, by looking at another student's monitor or browsing the Internet for answers). The teachers also had no concerns about students printing the answers for others to see.
- The teachers said that participating students tended to be more focused on the on-line tests because they had greater independence and control over their own test-taking process. They could, for example, independently re-read passages and return to questions to review their answers.
- Based on experiences in the Fall 2002 trial run, 62 percent of the teachers said that the same number of students or more students are likely to participate in online testing in Spring 2003.

### **Challenges**

Department officials continue to work on some elements of online assessment, including logistical issues related to local computer setup, simplifying local creation of school, teacher and student assessment profiles, and statewide availability of technical assistance and support. Scott Trimble, Associate Commissioner for Assessment and Accountability, reports that while online testing is a tremendous step toward equal access for students, there are still some challenges to be overcome. "One major challenge is to assure that instructional materials and other classroom assessments are provided in a similar format."

“Some students also reported problems understanding the computerized voice, and the software does occasionally mispronounce words,” he said. “Also, the online assessment software now available cannot read some mathematics symbols or permit students to perform illustrative functions such as drawing graphs. The department will need to set minimal standards for software and hardware that does what we need it to do in online INSTRUCTION and assessment.”

Also, some schools that participated in the fall trial run of online testing reported losing their Internet connections while administering the practice tests. They also reported that some teachers and students need more experience with textreader/screenreader software and the online assessment process.

The Department is still working on a method for students’ responses to all be recorded and submitted electronically, and until that option is developed, schools will need to plan for their students to enter their responses to online questions into a hard copy of the test response booklet, or if needed, to seek adult assistance with this component. Student open response items will need to be printed out and also inserted in the test booklet.

Trimble said that department staff and the assessment coordinators in the school districts will be working to help districts and schools prepare for this first opportunity in online assessment. He suggested that schools take four preparatory steps before this spring’s testing window (April 21- May 16):

1. Identify students who may qualify for online testing and ensure that they meet the eligibility requirements.
2. Schedule time for administrators, teachers and eligible students to use the testing system’s online practice area.
3. Be sure that online access is each eligible student’s preferred accommodation, and supply other accommodations (such as a human scribe/reader) if appropriate based on IEP.
4. Plan for logistical issues such as computer availability and setup/operation, student supervision/monitoring, and student support.

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For more information about Kentucky’s new online assessment option, contact one of these Department of Education staff members:

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